# Struggles for Modern Education: Egalitarian Liberalism and Its Quest for Equal Access to Opportunity

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**Abstract**

Egalitarian liberalism strives for equal access to opportunity and can achieve it. Every individual must be granted the chance to live his or her own life (Rawls, 1971). Our society must offer all citizens their own autonomy and live up to the egalitarian promises giving them respect. This paper disagrees with the notion that children raised in unequal conditions are unequally prepared for life's challenges. It is asserted here that modern education must be egalitarian in order to level the playing the field between rich and poor children. It is an infringement on parent's liberty to raise their own children (Duncan, 1997). The liberal state can achieve equality of opportunity for each new generation and the liberal promise will then be fulfilled. It can only be achieved through education since diverse parenting styles will get in the way.

**Keywords:** Egalitarian, Education, Parenting Styles

## 1. Introduction

Annette Lareau's sociological study entitled, *Unequal Childhoods* describes two very distinct types of parenting styles and roles. Lareau characterizes them as *concerted cultivation* and accomplishment *of natural growth*. The study documents how middle-class children are directed toward achievement at early ages and this is called *concerted cultivation* (Lareau, 2003.) The study details how middle-class children gain a significant advantage over other children because of their parents' economic resources (Lareau, 2003). Using their economic prowess, middle-class parents foster their children's skills and talents through this process Lareau called *concerted cultivation* (Lareau, 2003). Middle-class parents develop their children through after-school activities and verbal communication with their children (Lareau, 2003). Also, these parents tend to have more interactions with school officials and teachers. Therefore, communication plays a larger role within this paradigm, as Lareau states, "discussions between parents and children are the hallmark of middle-class child rearing. Like many middle-class parents, Ms.Williams and her husband see themselves as *developing* Alexander to cultivate his talents in a concerted fashion"(Lareau, 2003).

Lareau finds that this middle-class parenting style is superior to any other. It is superior because parents need to talk with their children so that their children can understand the world's complexities. Thus, parents are supposed to act like teachers and draw questions and answers out of their children, in order to elicit a deeper understanding of life. Beyond that, parents must take a special interest in their children, cultivating them like a household plant that is watered and nurtured through speech. For Lareau, this is the only true path to rearing children that are destined to be economically successful. Of course, this is the goal of every American parent, or at least, we are led to think it is the goal of every American parent, regardless of race or economic class. Every parent wants their child to do better or accomplish more than they ever did, so to speak.

### *1.1 A Middle-Class Parenting Style*

This middle-class parenting style features dominance and strict control by parents but it does have some major drawbacks to it, though. For one, this parenting model will result in children that are more dependent on their parents for every little thing. These children find it difficult to hear criticism from others outside the family home. They are often raised and spoiled and think that everything they do is superior. Parents cultivate these children to an extreme, raising their self-esteem levels, artificially high. I use the terms artificially high because parents praise children for insignificant things. While, in the real world, as opposed to the middle-class familial home, self-esteem is raised based on some truly meaningful accomplishment. I am talking about making the honor roll through hard work or athletic prowess in school sporting events. These are the ways to legitimately raise self-esteem levels in children. Middle-class parents tend to baby and coddle their children, sheltering them from the harshness and severity, of the real world. In the real world, not everyone will think that these middle-class are so wonderful. Praise will have to be earned and criticisms will come from teachers and from other children. This is a burden that must be shouldered and middle-class parents are doing their children a disservice, shielding them and artificially inflating, their self-esteem levels.

Another problem with this parenting style, that Lareau describes as more desirable than any other, is that children do not have much independence. Their parents guide and control them, as if they were, mere interactive toys. How can these children develop into individuals that are free from such parental control? Children do have the right of self-determination and should be free to choose their own occupations and life interests. There is parental pressure to pursue specific after-school activities that these parents feel will result in success, later in life. This parenting framework also results in children that are more competitive with their siblings. Naturally, there is fierce competition amongst siblings for parental admiration and attention under this type of framework.

### *1.2 Accomplishment of Natural Growth*

Contrarily, working-class and poor children do not gain as much attention from parents and there is no real parenting plan to cultivate them. This is largely due to a marked lack of time and money, but the type of parenting, also plays a role. Lareau (2003) notes that working-class and poor children focus on giving their children freedom to develop on their own. This process is called the *accomplishment of natural growth* since it provides for less parental influence on the child (Lareau, 2003). Working-class and poor children tend to spend more time without any adult supervision and less direction and shaping is done, as a result. Lareau (2003) asserts the following regarding working-class parenting style. She feels it is inferior to the middle-class parenting style, and states, "for them, the crucial responsibilities of parenthood do not lie in eliciting their children's feelings, opinions, and thoughts. Rather, they see a clear boundary between adults and children. Parents tend to use directives: they tell their children what to do rather than persuading them with reasoning. This is contrary to the middle-class parents, who provide a steady regimen of adult organized activities. Lareau (2003) finds "the working-class and poor children have more control over the character of their leisure activities" (Lareau, 2003). Here, we see that working class and poor children have more freedom to develop apart from excessive parental control that hinders their identity development. One positive aspect of this parental paradigm that Lareau does not consider is working-class and poor children are less likely to grow up as miniature versions of their parents. It is less likely that working-class children will be used as vehicles for their parents, to live their own lives through. It can be hard to resist the temptation to do that, since later generations can often achieve, more than the current generation. In the case of middle-class parents, they often super-impose their own unfulfilled goals onto their children. For example, If I did not get accepted to Harvard Law School then I would instill that hope, and that particular goal, in my own child. I can live vicariously through my child, in that regard.

As a middle-class parent, I can develop and cultivate my selfish interest, in my child, which is really unfair to the child. The child should be free to make her own choice without my harmful interference. My harmful interference would inhibit my child from developing her own identity and life goals. This harmful interference is only realized later in life, when the child reaches her thirties and begins to question how she was raised. Far worse, the child becomes an adult and realizes that she never wanted a certain career but was unfairly influenced by such obsessive and meddling parents, to pursue what they felt was right, for her. This problem does not occur within the working-class and poor parental model. Therefore, we do need to figure out what the correct balance is in order to avoid, the harmful effects that stem from both models.

## 2. Parental Roles, Economics, and *Concerted Cultivation*

Concerted Cultivation, according to Lareau, address the issue of responsibility. Therefore, the child's development becomes a key parental responsibility. Under this framework or parenting style, parents would conduct conversations with their children and treat them as young adults. These parents tend to challenge their children and to foster the development of critical thinking skills early on. These rigorous academic activities serve as a form of parental nurturing. Whereas, Lareau calls for the supremacy of the one model over the other, advocating that all parents, regardless of income, need to follow the middle-class parental role because it is superior. Lareau muses, "Allthough middle-class children miss out on kin relationships and leisure time, they appear to (at least potentially) gain important institutional advantages. It is from the experience of *concerted cultivation*, that skills are developed preparing them for the future, when they enter the job market (Lareau, 2003). Here, this view is problematic because it only takes economics into account and it does not consider issues about individuality and identity formation. I disagree with Lareau that children are better prepared for the working world under the middle-class parenting paradigm, since these children, more so, than the working-class or poor children, tend to find themselves in careers their parents chose for them. Also, middle-class parents often solve problems for their children, rendering their children, less enabled to tackle some of difficulties in the real world. Most employers prefer workers that can work with little or no supervision, since that increases productivity saving time and money. The middle-class parenting paradigm features significant parental supervision and arguably, these children will need that throughout their lives. Middle-class parenting frameworks even penetrate the middle-class children's social lives as parents try to influence who or whom the

children marry. Issues about sexual identity also creep in, and many gay children hide their sexuality from their parents for fear of disapproval and alienation. Providing a home life that encourages independence and freedom, for individual identities to develop, is truly more consistent with an egalitarian liberal framework. There seems to be a tension between raising independent decision makers versus raising children who are cultivated to achieve greatness.

### *2.1 Poor Children and Authority Figures*

Lareau's study argues that working-class children, poor children, and their parents were less comfortable with authority figures (Lareau, 2003). This can lead to parents not seeking help for their children when it comes to education, in general. While, they may be less comfortable, they are not completely adverse to it. Whereas, the middle-class parenting style features an extreme response coupled with an entitlement mentality, as they view school officials, as impediments to their son or daughter becoming the next President of the United States. This is especially true if a teacher criticizes a child when that is never done by parents at home. The middle-class parent often calls school officials and teachers to intervene on the child's behalf. One problem with that is the child never learns to deal with problems on her own. The parent is always there to handle controversies for her. This is problematic when you consider how the real world works, as problems are always cropping up. It is important for children to learn problem solving skills, as early as possible, and for children to begin taking responsibility for their own lives. Parents, like good teachers, would be there to shed light and not to master, so to speak. Next, I shall move into the solutions and some recommendations for the future.

### *2.2 Recommendations for the Future*

There is a version of liberalism that features a mixture of diversity and freedom in family life with equal opportunity designed for children. The family unit will coexist with equality of opportunity even as it stands opposed to liberal ideals that are contested within liberalism. The specific issues that are contested are: the meaning of equality of opportunity, the duties that are part of the liberal family, the nature and scope of parents' autonomy. It is generally not accepted within liberalism that equality for children is possible if we have parental liberty (Dwyer, 2006). It is an uphill battle but it is entirely possible to align the family with this notion of equality. The expensive governmental programs needed to equalize a child's living standard will not lead to discord between equality and families. Rather, families do not have to be totally economically self-sufficient to provide children with food and shelter.

### *2.3 An Egalitarian Approach*

An egalitarian state does support parental care with its inclusion of additional quality-based educational programs that feature student-based extracurricular tasks. The egalitarian state also has paid leave for families, drug rehabilitation, parental counseling and many other parental support resources (Blustein, 1983). Our current legal system tends to prefer parental rights over the rights of children (Barnett & Belfield, 2006). The judiciary has endowed parents with complete control to take over their child's life. We walk a fine and narrow line when we tinker with First Amendment issues and with limiting parental rights over their offspring.

## 3. Egalitarian Liberalism

Egalitarian liberalism rejects libertarian theory that presupposes extreme autonomy and individual freedoms without any burdens imposed by the state. It consists of just doing anything that you want without any governmental restrictions. It is characterized by calling for equal freedom for all people. This requires the state to control the dissemination of resources such as food and water to all. Every individual can basically live their own lives as long as they do not interfere with another's freedom. There is a conflict inherent in this theory as it relates to parents and children (Lareau, 2003). Can parents let their children do anything that they want to do? Therefore, in this instance the family is a negative aspect and one that is hard for liberalism to reconcile. It seems that everything is fine as long as we are talking about adults but the problem surfaces when we mention children. The familial unit is usually the first place where children experience societal inequality (Lareau, 2003). We tend to differentiate and vary our treatment of children depending on whether they have siblings and based on birth order.

### *3.1 A Dilemma for Liberal Ideas*

Family life is hampered by injustices that affect a child's life. It is rich children who claim inheritances and benefit from a distinct class advantage. Impoverished children suffer from poor health, unproductive schools, and less choice in terms of social and financial opportunities. Families diverge in other ways and this may lead to unequal life chances for children (Lareau, 2003). Of course, the parents' religious activities can affect a child's development. These differences led liberal scholars to conclude that any wish for equality for children will

conflict with the idea about parental liberty. Children cannot be free from parental influence over them especially concerning religion.

## 4. Developing a Conceptual Model for Liberalism

Scholars find that the dilemma within liberalism concerns the merit principle, family autonomy, and equal life chances (Mayer, 1997). Children cannot choose how their lives will be shaped and they are dependent on their parents. They lack the ability to make informed choices due to their tender ages and limited resources. The choices that their parents make for them dictate what their futures will be like. The problem is that family background tends to lead children into predestined slots within our society's hierarchy. Parental autonomy refers to the protective zone whereby parents determine and carry out their own choices how to live their own lives (Mayer, 1997). Any attempts by the government to equalize the conditions in which children are raised will not infringe on parental ability to structure family life. Families will be able to structure the details of family life including religious and cultural practices.

## 5. Implications

Liberal theory rests on education and redistribution as programs to redistribute resources can encourage more equality by allowing greater access to food and shelter (Dworkin, 2000). Education helps to promote equality since it can try to account or adjust for differences in family background. It is true that a liberal education must prepare children to learn to make informed choices. It must teach them to reason and expose them to lifestyles and cultures that differ from their own. These are not incomplete solutions for family equality. The state must create material equality by redistributing resources to give suffering children a chance to be like other children who have enough access to food and shelter.

### *5.1 Education Can Mitigate Inequities*

Liberal education models can reduce the harm from the inequities children experience but they can never be truly eradicated. There are numerous ways that educational institutions can make up for inequalities in terms of the child's social class. A cookie-cutter approach to education that stresses equal involvement in the learning and assessment processes should help to ensure academic success for all. Academic success may be analogous with success in life in terms of having more career choices apart from parental influence. It is necessary for improvements in public schools to account for the disparity between students of rich and poor families.

### *5.2 Class Inequality and Multiculturalism*

Wealthier children tend to do better in school because they have access to more resources and can pay for tutoring help. Their families tend to encourage them to participate more in extra-curricular activities. This involvement leads to greater involvement in school and higher learning outcomes. At this point, we must ask about the role of multiculturalism, as a factor in academic success. Multiculturalism refers to the problems between religious and ethnic groups as they struggle to exist together (Gutman, 1992). The ethnic values and their competing truth claims take a toll on children as they struggle to make sense of these divergent interests. Surely, this struggle to find their own identities competes with their abilities to focus on school work. They have to deal with academic challenges and pressures from multiculturalism. The challenge for multiculturalism is how to provide equality for all. It is concerned with representation for all divergent interests.

Can there be an educational system that takes multiculturalism into account? Liberalism dictates that each group should be able to freely and equally choose the pursuit of their shared needs. These children must lead a life that is decidedly good, according to their notions, of what that means. It is important for educational institutions to focus on the politics of equality (Taylor, 1992), if all students are meant to succeed, academically. This is contrary to Rousseau who did not advocate for any special recognition of particular cultural identities (Rousseau, 1950). Since we live in a culture whereby the majority rules, the way that we educate our students is a directly influenced by the majority leaving out the minority.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is always a danger that parents would object to the implementation of more egalitarian educational programs. The fear of losing control over their children would outweigh any goodwill. Certainly, middle-class parents would tend to feel that only they can shape their child the best way. We must remember that individual liberty and equality are the most important values. It is important for individuals to discover their own identities uninfluenced by their parents. Liberty can only be truly meaningful for everyone if these children are free to choose their own lives. The liberal state must support families even if they object to a liberal education.

Clearly, there are many obstacles to implementing a liberal egalitarian approach but this is a course worth pursuing as the world becomes more diverse and education even more important. Education's importance cannot be underscored enough, since it is through education, that we receive the means necessary to execute our life plans. Our life plans should reflect our tastes and talents. If a mismatch occurs in an individual's talents and opportunities, then unhappiness will likely result. If there is too much parental influence and aspects of children's identities were suppressed in childhood, in order to please parents, then their true life plan will not be fulfilled. Education should help students figure out what their life plan will be. It should also expose students to a variety of experiences so that students can figure out where their aptitude and interests lie. It is the role of an educational system to do this rather than parents. Parents are just too subjective to help their children develop their life plans. There is just too much at stake for the parents and the parents do not have the resources that educational institutions have.

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